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# The Influence of Commercialism on the Food Purchasing Behavior of Children and Teenage Youth

Vivica Kraak  
David L. Pelletier

Division of Nutritional Sciences  
Cornell University

The nutritional well-being of children is a high priority, given our knowledge relating nutrition to health risks in this group and the importance of early childhood experiences in forming lifetime behavioral patterns. Children are becoming consumers at younger ages, and a variety of influences and experiences shapes their consumer habits. This paper reviews the marketing literature to gain insight into the purchasing power, habits, and purchase influence of children and teenage youth and also to examine the influence of commercialism on their food purchasing behavior. The findings are discussed within the context of building young consumers' information-processing skills in order to help them make informed dietary choices in the marketplace.

**S**triving to achieve optimal nutritional well-being among children is a high priority, given our knowledge relating nutrition to disease risks and the importance of early childhood experiences in forming lifetime behavioral patterns. The eating patterns of children and teenagers have changed significantly over the past two decades. Children and teenage youth are eating more frequently, getting a greater proportion of their nutrient intake from snacks, eating more meals away from home, and consuming more fast food (4,16). Nationwide surveys show that food consumption patterns of most American children do not meet the

Dietary Guidelines. The average diet of American children exceeds the recommendations for fat, saturated fat, and sodium, and childhood obesity is a growing problem across all income strata (16). Thus, it appears unlikely that the goals for children's diets for fat and saturated fat set forth in the Healthy People Objectives 2000 will be reached by the year 2000 (16).

Children are becoming consumers at younger and younger ages, and a variety of influences and experiences shapes their consumer habits. Of particular interest and concern are factors that affect their food- and nutrition-related

decisions and behavior. Many factors interplay to affect children's and teenage youths' consumer decisionmaking skills and behavior that can directly influence their dietary choices and eating patterns. The family has been identified as one of the most influential environmental factors affecting food- and nutrition-related decisions and behavior, operating at the levels of parent modeling and parent-child interactions (7).

Recent changes in American family structure, intrafamilial decisionmaking, and women's work patterns have had a profound influence on the growing economic power, control, and independence of children and teenage youth, with the result that they now exert a stronger influence on family decision-making than their cohorts did in previous years (21). Other factors that may potentially affect children's and teenage youths' consumer habits are peer influence, ethnicity and culture, the school environment, and commercialism (4,21,25).

Commercialism is broadly defined as the vehicle of communication that creates consumer awareness and induces the desire for specific products; its goal is to increase consumer demand and commercial profit (25). Commercial pressures on children and teenage youth may encourage continual consumption and acquisition at the expense of informed consumer decisionmaking and environmental sensitivity (2). Children with poorly developed consumer decision-making skills are unprepared to make wise purchases as adults, a situation that has serious implications for the consumer habits and nutritional health of future generations.

The purpose of this paper is to review the general purchasing power, purchase influence, and habits of children, ages 4-11, and teenage youth, ages 12-19. The review is followed by an examination of the influence of commercialism on food purchasing behavior. In particular, this paper reviews the findings and trends from the marketing literature, rather than from the nutrition education literature, in order to share the marketing perspective with nutrition professionals. Specifically, it aims to integrate what has been learned from consumer behavior research into nutrition education interventions so that young consumers can make informed choices and purchases in the marketplace. The findings are discussed within the broader context of consumer socialization.

### **Purchasing Power, Purchase Influence, and Habits**

Descriptive data from marketing surveys provide useful information about children's and teenage youths' amount and sources of income, as well as their saving and spending habits. Data from the 1987-88 National Survey of Families and Households indicate that about 47 percent of teenagers ages 12-18 living in two-parent families receive an allowance, and an estimated 62 percent report earned income (9). According to the 1990 Consumer Expenditure Survey, teenage youth, ages 14-19, employed outside the home had mean annual earnings of \$2,611 in two-earner, two-parent families, compared with \$2,704 in one-earner, two-parent families. These results suggest that the direct monetary contribution of teenage youths' employment on middle-class family income and expenditures appears to be minimal (9), compared with their influence on family purchases.

In 1989, the income of 4- to 12-year-olds averaged \$4.42 each week or about \$230 each year (22). Between 1989 and 1991, the income of this age group increased 82 percent despite an economic recession. This is a significant figure to marketers, because the majority of children can use most of their money for discretionary purposes (22). Children receive more than 80 percent of their income from the family and the remainder from other sources such as outside jobs. Income sources include gifts from parents, relatives, and friends; household chores; and work done outside the home (20). The purchasing power of children and teenage youth increases significantly beyond what they earn or receive as gifts when their "purchase influence"<sup>1</sup> is considered (27).

Each year the purchase influence of children increases with age: \$15 billion for 3- to 5-year-olds, \$45 billion for 6- to 8-year-olds, \$65 billion for 9- to 11-year-olds, \$80 billion for 12- to 14-year-olds, and \$90 billion for 15- to 17-year-olds (table 1) (27). Teenage youth are spending more of the family dollar as they take on increasing responsibilities in the home. They are exerting more independence than in the past because a growing number of them have a car, a job, dual-earner parents, and access to family credit cards. The total amount of family income teenagers spend increases as they get older (12).

<sup>1</sup>*Purchase influence* is a term used by marketers and is defined as a child's or teenager's influence on family purchases. Children's items include toys and clothes; housing items, televisions and stereo equipment; and family items, vacations and food.

**Table 1. The spending power of children and teenage youth**

	Ages				
	3-5	6-8	9-11	12-14	15-17
<b>Spending</b>					
\$/week/person	\$2.40	\$3.80	\$4.80	\$22.00	\$43.00
\$ billion/year	\$1.50	\$2.20	\$2.80	\$12.00	\$23.00
<b>Purchase influence of segment</b>					
\$ billion	\$15.00	\$45.00	\$65.00	\$80.00	\$90.00

Source: Stipp, H., 1993, *New ways to reach children*, *American Demographics* 15:50-56.

Children make independent shopping trips, and their saving and spending habits differ by gender. Nearly 75 percent of 7- to 9-year-olds make an average of two independent trips to the store each week. A 10-year-old averages 5 visits each week to 5 different stores, representing 250 store visits each year (20).

Children save an average of 40 percent of their income. Girls and boys ages 4-12 have significantly different saving and spending habits (22). Although girls have a lower income and expenditures than boys have, girls are in stores more often. Girls receive lower weekly incomes than boys receive (\$7.66 versus \$8.87); the greatest difference is attributed to a lower weekly allowance. However, girls save about 25 percent more than boys save. Compared with boys, girls go to stores by themselves less frequently, a weekly average of .84 times, compared with 1.11 times for boys. On a weekly basis, girls, however, visit stores more often with their parents, averaging 2.65 visits, compared with 2.34 visits for boys.

### **Food Purchasing Behavior**

Because the current generation of young consumers is making more decisions than previous generations of children and teenage youth, they are influencing more family decisions concerning food (30). Findings from the 1989 USA Weekend/Roper Report on Consumer Decision-Making in American Families suggest that 78 percent of children and teenage youth influence where the family goes for fast food; 55 percent, the choice of restaurant for dinner; 50 percent, the type of food the family eats at home; and 31 percent, the specific product brands that families purchase. Parents are two to three times more likely to name a child—not themselves—as the family expert for selection of fast food, snack food, restaurants, and new breakfast cereals (30).

Another survey confirms these findings. It indicates that nearly 50 percent of parents believe that meal and grocery choices and restaurant selection are influenced by their children (3). When

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asked to describe the barriers that interfere with their family changing to a healthful diet, parents identified two: varying food preferences of family members and children's desire to eat advertised foods (3).

Almost half of family food expenditures (46 percent) are for food and beverages served outside the home, with 34 percent of the total food dollar spent on fast foods (4). When families eat at home and their food has been prepared elsewhere, they support a \$45.5 billion restaurant take-out market (4). Marketers have identified several characteristics children look for in their favorite restaurants: Best food, best toys and prizes, best meal packs, the most fun, best playgrounds, and the opportunity to accompany friends with their parents (11).

McNeal investigated the total sales, percent of sales influenced by children, and the volume of child-influenced sales in billions of 1990 dollars (21). These findings suggest that on average, children influence 17 percent of family spending in 62 product categories totaling \$132 billion. At least one-third of the industry sales of fast foods, candy and gum, packaged cookies, hot cereals, juices and juice drinks, peanut butter, frozen pizza, and toaster products are influenced by children (table 2) (21).

Television commercials and prime-time programs have been identified as important influences on the types of food that children ask their parents to buy for them and the food they buy for themselves. Sweetened breakfast cereals, candy, desserts, low-nutrient beverages, and salty snack foods are the most commonly advertised products to children and are also the items most frequently requested of parents (6,14,17,28,29).

**Table 2. Selected food-related product categories, percent of sales influenced by children, and volume of child-influenced sales (\$ billions of 1990 dollars)**

Category	Total industry sales (\$ billions)	Percent of sales influenced by children	Volume of child-influenced sales (\$ billions)
Bakery goods	\$26.10	10%	\$2.61
Candy and gum	10.43	33	3.44
Cereals (cold)	6.90	20	1.38
Cereals (hot)	0.74	50	.037
Cookies (packaged)	4.30	40	1.72
Dairy goods	40.20	10	4.02
Fast foods	65.00	35	22.75
Fruits and vegetables			
Canned	3.00	20	0.60
Fresh	43.40	6	2.60
Ice cream	7.60	23	1.75
Juices and juice drinks	10.00	33	3.30
Meats			
Packaged	17.10	13	2.20
Fresh	43.10	10	4.30
Microwave meals	2.30	30	.069
Peanut butter	1.40	40	.056
Pizza (frozen)	0.92	40	0.37
Salty snacks	8.30	25	2.08
Soda	46.60	30	13.98
Toaster products	0.25	45	0.11
Yogurt	1.20	10	0.12
Total	\$338.84*	-	\$67.49**

\*This figure represents 44.1 percent of total sales in 19 of 62 product categories.

\*\*This figure represents 50.8 percent of the total volume of child-influenced sales in 19 of 62 product categories.

Source: McNeal, J.U., 1992, *The littlest shoppers*, *American Demographics* 14(2):48-53.

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Isler et al. explored the nature and frequency of products and services that children ages 3-11 requested of their mothers during a 28-day period, how and where they made purchase requests, and mothers' perceptions of the key reasons for children's specific requests (14). Results suggest the following:

- Preschool children make significantly more requests than made by older, elementary school-age children.
- Food accounts for over half (54.5 percent) of total requests made by children, representing snack foods (23.9 percent), candy (16.8 percent), cereal (6.8 percent), fast foods (3.6 percent), and fruit and vegetables (3.4 percent).
- Children's desire for cereal and snack foods remains constant across all age categories.
- Children request more presweetened cereals than other types, accounting for nearly two-thirds (64.9 percent) of all cereal requests.
- Sugared dessert products account for most snack items requested, followed by beverages and salty snacks such as chips and pretzels.
- Most of the older children's requests are made at home; whereas, younger children tend to make requests while shopping with their mothers.
- Mothers indicate that seeing the product in the store is the primary reason younger children request candy, but the mothers believe that several influences besides television advertising account for older children's purchase requests (14).

In 8 of 10 cases, the supermarket is the first store that children visit. This is where more than 75 percent of children make their first purchase request;

56 percent, their first self-selection; and 20 percent, their first assisted purchase. A discount store is the most likely site of a child's first independent purchase, where 43 percent of children buy their first item unassisted. Almost half (47 percent) of children's in-store requests are for ready-to-eat cereals, and 30 percent of first product requests are for snack items such as candy, cookies, and frozen desserts. Marketers believe that parents often give these items to their children as rewards. Hence marketers reinforce this practice through targeted advertising (23).

To increase their share of the future adult market, product manufacturers and advertisers share the common objective of building brand loyalty among children and teenage youth (12). Market research reveals that children and teenage youth identify products more frequently by brand name rather than food category (1,10). Product usage information also indicates that children have significant influence over what brands are bought for them. One study revealed that 65 percent of mothers shopping for food and beverages divided their purchases equally between store brands and national brands. When a child influenced a purchase, the child requested a national brand by name 80 percent of the time and a product by category only 20 percent of the time (1).

Differences in age and cognitive development appear to affect the purchasing behavior of young consumers in the marketplace. When a group of 4- to 10-year-old children were asked to classify cereal and beverage products based on either perceptual attributes (e.g., product shape, color, or package size) or underlying attributes (e.g., flavor, sweetness, and nutritional content), younger children used perceptual attributes to group

products; whereas, older children relied more on underlying attributes. Extending these findings to a marketing context, advertisers might expect younger children to use perceptual cues and older children to use underlying cues to classify brands. Marketers commonly use both types of attributes to market products to children and teenagers because there are few real differences between brand products (15).

Among 16- to 17-year-olds, girls spend more of the family income than boys do because girls shop for groceries more frequently. Over half of the 29 million 12- to 19-year-old girls in the United States shop for part or all of the families' groceries each week. Teenage boys are less likely than teenage girls to shop for groceries. More than two-thirds of teenagers have working mothers, and half of their mothers work full-time (12).

A geodemographic cluster analysis suggests a strong relationship between working mothers and teenage grocery shopping (12). Upper and lower income urban households, as well as lower income households in small towns, are above average in the proportion of mothers of teenagers employed full-time. These clusters also have the highest percentage of teenagers who do the grocery shopping for the family, each month spending, on average, \$100 of the family budget. Nearly 85 percent of teenagers who do the family grocery shopping say they shop at a large supermarket where a full range of brand products is available. Fifteen percent shop at convenience stores or small family-owned stores. Because a majority of teens are making food-related brand choices for their families, advertisers are using teen-targeted media to build or reinforce brand loyalty during the teenage years (12).

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## **Implications**

Given the widespread influence of commercialism on the purchasing power, purchase influence, and habits of children and teenage youth, researchers believe that building children's and teenage youths' consumer information processing skills is essential if they are expected to make informed choices and purchases in the marketplace (31). A knowledge of consumer information-processing skills is useful to understand the process that children and teenage youth use to make consumer decisions. By taking a broad approach to improve children's and teenagers' overall ability to act as informed consumers in the marketplace, nutritionists can work collaboratively with potential allies and stakeholders who are also interested in building or strengthening relevant skills. The desirable result is to influence positively children's and teenagers' overall consumer behavior, including their food- and nutrition-related behavior.

Most children will master the basic consumer skills they will use all of their lives before they start school (23). Prior to formal schooling, children have already acquired consumption experiences, attitudes, and motives for their purchases. Using their own and other's experiences, children learn the value of money, what money can buy, how to shop, and what to choose (23).

McNeal proposes a five-stage process that children go through as they become consumers: Observing, making requests, making selections, making assisted purchases, and making independent purchases (23). Several factors shape children's consumer habits at different ages, and their consumer behavior can be described by age and developmental patterns (24). Elementary school-age

children are in a stage of mastering consumer literacy skills. Older children move from perceiving information to inferring what the information means and move to progressively learning the consumer decisionmaking sequence that provides the basis for their marketplace interactions as they become adults (24).

Consumer socialization refers to the continual process by which children acquire knowledge and skills and develop attitudes relevant to their present and future behavior as consumers. Consumer socialization is best understood in the context of children developing abilities to select, evaluate, and use information relevant to purchasing. These abilities are also referred to as consumer information-processing skills, examples of which are understanding the purpose of television commercials, differentiating between product brands and attributes, and demonstrating how to spend and save discretionary income effectively (31).

The stages of the information processing model are exposure, attention, comprehension, retention and retrieval, and decisionmaking (5). The information-processing sequence that a consumer typically goes through consists of environmental influences, initial processing, central processing, and outcome (see figure). The two major environmental influences on a child's purchase decision that are identified in this example are the family and television; many others exist. Initial and central processing describes the different cognitive abilities that children use to acquire information (e.g., searching for it, listening to it, selecting what to use, structuring it, interpreting it, and using it). The purchase decision refers to the outcome of a child's decision. A decision to make a purchase requires the child to design a strategy to obtain what is desired (31).

### An information-processing model of a specific purchase decision

<i>Environment</i>	<i>Initial Processing</i>	<i>Central Processing</i>	<i>Outcome</i>
family	information search	interpretation & comprehension	purchase decision
television	attention →	structuring information	
	information selection	evaluation	
		use of information	

Source: Ward et al., 1977, *How Children Learn to Buy: The Development of Consumer Information-Processing Skills*, Sage Publications, Beverly Hills, CA.

Understanding how consumers process information can assist in designing education strategies that will help consumers' food decisionmaking (5). Because children are active participants in the consumer socialization process, it is important to know why they listen to some messages and not others and how environmental factors influence how they process information. Consumer socialization research has helped to identify children's abilities to process the information they receive from the marketplace and has helped to identify gaps in their knowledge and skills that can be addressed within a variety of environmental settings, including home and school (31).

For instance, children and teenagers who shop for themselves and for others require different types of shopping skills. Some skills can be learned by observing and imitating the behavior

of others, but most require underlying cognitive skills in order to understand goal-oriented shopping. Some of these skills develop naturally in children; whereas, other skills must be taught. According to the marketing literature, children and teenagers require a range of cognitive skills to be "effective" shoppers, such as classification (e.g., the ability to read and express oneself); arithmetic (e.g., the ability to read numerals, to know ordinal values, to divide, and to count money); and social cognition (e.g., the ability to identify the sales representative and cashier) (26). Nonmarketers, however, may value different types of skills for children and youth to be "effective" shoppers, such as being able to evaluate information critically, to make the wisest purchase among many options, and to buy based on need instead of fashion or product promotion.

A difference exists between what a child ought to be able to do based on his/her level of cognitive development or age and the skills that a child actually applies within a specific context. In one instance, even though fourth graders knew how to use division to calculate unit prices, the majority did not apply this skill in a consumer context. Neither are adult consumers always aware of, or use, unit prices when making purchase decisions (26).

### Building Young Consumers' Information-Processing Skills

The recent literature in consumer behavior and nutrition education notes the importance of teaching children consumer skills (5,18,26). Parents who teach consumer skills to their children can increase young consumers' appreciation for the challenges families face. Shopping trips are an opportunity for parents to teach their children valuable consumer skills (5). Parents can help children learn consumer skills by having them make a list of items that fit within a budget; visiting stores with familiar layouts; selecting items from short shopping lists; allowing them to spend small amounts of money; helping them make comparisons on the basis of values other than unit price; and purchasing the food that the family needs for one or several days following the guideline that each day's meal should be nutritionally balanced and fit within the family's food budget (26). The benefits of these recommendations will depend, of course, upon the quality of a parent's nutrition knowledge and consumer skills.

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Parents appear to be especially interested in promoting good nutrition habits for their children (4,7). However, parents need knowledge, tools, incentives, and environmental support to provide healthful food choices and to help teach sound eating practices to their children (4). Nutrition educators and other information multipliers can encourage parents to participate in convenient and intensive education efforts involving “hands on” activities that they can share with their children at home and in school (3). Parents can also take on greater responsibility to discuss with their children the purpose of advertising, how to analyze commercial messages, how to apply consumer information-processing skills in the marketplace, and even limiting television viewing as needed (13).

School-based interventions designed to improve young consumers’ information-processing skills can be made at multiple levels. Consumer education may begin at school in the early grades when children’s learning and behavior pertaining to food- and nutrition-related decisions can be influenced.

According to the recommendations presented at the National Action Conference on Healthy Eating for Children, schools; school districts; and local, State, and Federal governments must commit resources to comprehensive, school-based nutrition education programming where healthful eating practices are integrated into other core school subjects. Hence behavioral skills can be established among elementary school-age children and built upon with more abstract problem-solving skills for older children and teenagers (18).

School teachers need comprehensive knowledge of the content of nutrition and fitness education and curricula for integrating nutrition and fitness into broader concepts such as wellness (18). School curricula also need to encourage media literacy to help students become critical viewers of television, movies, and advertising (2). Multiple instructional techniques (e.g., experiential and interactive learning and group problem solving) can be used to convey consumer information-processing skills and healthful eating principles and practices to children and teenagers (2,13,26).

Curricula have been developed to assist children at specific grade levels to understand, assess, and evaluate the intent and sources of advertisements, with special emphasis on improving food purchases in the marketplace (19). Nevertheless, comprehensive evaluations of these curricula are needed to determine effectiveness, and multiple, complementary approaches will be required to raise children’s awareness and build consumer information-processing skills, given the growing and lasting presence of commercialism in the lives of young consumers. Nutrition research conducted with adult consumers indicates that this group wants nutrition information, but it is often unutilized because it is difficult to use, not readily available, or not perceived as being useful or new (8).

## Summary

A variety of sociocultural, economic, and demographic factors has had a significant influence on the growing economic power, control, and independence exerted by children and teenage youth and also influences their dietary choices and eating patterns. Given the pervasive influence of commercialism in the lives of young consumers and their increasing purchasing power, purchase influence, and habits, special efforts are required to help them make informed choices and purchases in the marketplace. Consumer information-processing theory can be a helpful framework for future research and practice. Building children’s and teenage youths’ consumer information-processing skills is one strategy, when combined with parental guidance and environmental support (including government and industry partnerships), that can help young consumers make healthful dietary choices before undesirable dietary behaviors have developed.



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